



Special Report

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Delay Does Matter

Republicans Block Disaster Relief

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Democratic Policy Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510-7050

Tom Daschle, Chairman
Harry Reid, Co-Chairman



Summary

President Clinton submitted a request for disaster relief on March 19. It took 50 days for the Senate to act on its version. Fifteen days later, Congress adjourned for its Memorial Day break without finishing the bill. All told, it's took more than 80 days to get a bill to the President. Several states were hit by disastrous flooding even while waiting for relief from heavy winter storms earlier in the year.

After all that waiting, Republicans produced a bill that was designed to be vetoed, not to provide the help thousands of Americans need. Congressional Republicans are effectively blocking passage of urgently needed disaster relief legislation by insisting on adding several controversial but unrelated proposals to the disaster relief bill.

GOP Delay Is Unnecessary and Damaging

They defend their actions by claiming that disaster relief is available and delaying the legislation is not preventing people from getting the help they need. Unfortunately, that claim is false. Republicans are delaying the effort to help people recover from flooding and other natural disasters in 33 States across the country, with a particularly severe impact on the upper Midwest States of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

To make matters worse, several of the provisions Republicans are seeking to add are primarily motivated by politics. They are designed not to help solve problems but to increase Republicans' short-term political bargaining leverage and long-term political prospects. In the name of politics, Republicans chose to ignore the need for prompt disaster relief and sent the President a bill that has been vetoed, as they knew it would be even before they acted.

A Response to Disaster Needs

The House and Senate have crafted a sound disaster relief bill that responds to needs in 33 States, most of which experienced disasters earlier this year. Floods in California, other Northwestern States, as well as the Ohio and Mississippi valleys are among the disasters covered by the bill.

The most pressing needs are in the upper Midwestern States, which have been hit more recently than others. Not only did that region experience particularly heavy flooding, it did so after earlier disasters had used up some of the funding available for important relief programs. Indeed, the floods resulted from heavy snow storms that hit the same region earlier in the year. As a result, the people of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota are suffering the most from Congress' failure to act responsibly.

The scenes of the flooding in Grand Forks, North Dakota and East Grand Forks, Minnesota probably remain the most memorable images of the disaster. Most of those two cities were under water when the Red River flooded. Fires further damaged the downtown area. The Grand Forks Herald reported that eighty percent of the homes in that area were damaged: Thousands of them remain unlivable because almost 10 percent of the homes and apartment units were total losses. Hundreds of small businesses have had to close because of the flood and thousands of people still need housing. The Red Cross has served more than one million meals in the Grand Forks area alone.

The losses were not limited to the Grand Forks area. At one point the Red River was 23 miles wide and many rural communities were also hit hard. Direct Agriculture losses are estimated at \$270 million in North Dakota alone, with a total economic impact of nearly \$1 billion. As a result of the disaster, about 1.1 million acres in North Dakota will not be planted this year.

In a letter to Senate Democratic Leader **Tom Daschle**, one of his constituents—Nolan Seim of Shadehill, South Dakota—described the impact of the winter storms on livestock:

“When the winds finally died, we went to check our cattle. We had bedded heavily and created the best possible protection for them.

“We found a horrifying sight; the cows looked as if they were walking snowballs. They had suffocated from ice covering their nostrils. As we went along we found dead calves scattered and tromped into the earth. Some stood like statues froze over with snow, blinded by the same.”

Ranchers throughout the area can tell similar stories. 350,000 livestock were lost in South Dakota, over \$145 million in damages. In North Dakota, 131,000 cattle were lost, \$55 million in losses from cattle deaths alone.

This year, South Dakota has experienced: its coldest winter on record; its most severe winter blizzard in history; and, a 500-year flood. In fact, all year there have only been two days in which a Presidential disaster has not been in effect in South Dakota. First, winter storms produced 20-foot snow drifts, helping block more than 13,000 miles of roads. Then, a spring storm dumped several more feet of snow on western South Dakota, and several inches of rain in the eastern part of the state. Every river in South Dakota exceeded flood stage. In Watertown, South Dakota, flood waters forced 5,000 residents to flee their homes. The total damage in South Dakota is estimated at over \$450 million.

The Bill Is Urgently Needed

Of course, disaster relief will not make people whole. It will not even cover the economic losses, let alone the personal loss of seeing a lifelong home destroyed. Nevertheless, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees did a good job. On a bipartisan basis, they produced a fair disaster relief bill. Unfortunately, that bill and its \$5.4 billion in disaster assistance for 33 States is now being delayed, primarily by the Republican congressional leadership.

Republicans defend their delay by arguing that relief is not urgently needed because adequate funds are in the pipeline. And it's true that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) still has disaster relief funds available. The bill provides FEMA with additional resources so that funds will be available to provide disaster relief later in the year. The additional money for FEMA is important since recent tornadoes in Texas remind us that additional disasters are likely later in the year, particularly since we have yet to experience the forest fires and hurricanes that occur nearly every summer. A long delay jeopardizes communities across the nation in areas that may suffer a disaster later in the summer.

However, FEMA is responsible for immediate short-term disaster relief. Other programs place a greater emphasis on long-term rebuilding efforts. Unfortunately, many of those programs are simply out of funds because of earlier disasters. The legislation includes funding for a number of non-FEMA programs. That money is needed now, in the Dakotas, in Minnesota, in California and the Pacific Northwest, and in many other parts of the nation. Discussed below are some types of assistance that Republicans are undeniably delaying.

Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs)

The legislation includes \$500 million for CDBGs, to be used for buy-outs and relocations of flooded homes, longterm recovery and disaster mitigation in communities affected by disasters. The Department of Housing and Urban Development does not have funds available for these grants and many communities need these funds to help resettle people who lost their homes and to help their businesses and local economies to recover from the recent disasters.

Delay has significant consequences. It could cause more small entrepreneurs to go out of business while they wait for help rebuilding. Thousands of families will face continued homelessness and uncertainty about where and when they will be able to move into a new home. In addition, the upper Midwest has a relatively short construction season due to weather conditions and delay will reduce the amount of work that can be done this year. The same short construction season will also impact road repairs— the bill also includes emergency highway assistance that is being held up by the delay.

The City of Grand Forks alone has identified an estimated \$530 million in CDBG needs. Other communities in the region also experienced hundreds of millions in losses. CDBG grants cannot make up all these losses. But they will provide significant help and encouragement to thousands of families that are struggling to rebuild their homes and businesses.

Emergency Conservation Program

This program helps farmers rehabilitate their land after a disaster: removing debris; fencing pastures; leveling cropland; etc. Unfortunately, no funds are available in that program because earlier disasters in the Pacific Northwest used up the existing resources. However, there are remaining needs in that area, as well as damaged farmland in Ohio, Arkansas, the Dakotas, and Minnesota. The bill includes \$70 million for this important program. Further delay means that fewer farmers will be able to prepare their lands for planting this year.

Livestock indemnity

The winter storms had a devastating impact on ranchers and their herds, with hundreds of thousands of lost livestock. Ranchers have received no assistance to recover from those losses. Republicans are delaying a \$50 million livestock indemnification program that will compensate ranchers for a portion of their losses.

Watershed and Flood Prevention

The legislation includes \$166 million for watershed and flood prevention activities. The funds are needed to help rural areas clean up after recent flooding and to repair or rebuild small flood and water control structures. Delay in these projects exposes communities to future floods from storms that would ordinarily not be severe enough to cause significant flooding.

Emergency loans

The Farm Service Agency's emergency loan programs are running out of funds. The legislation includes additional funds for the agency's loan programs. The funds will allow for about \$59 million in emergency insured loans, \$55 million in guaranteed operating loans, and \$50 million in direct operating loans. These loans will help farmers in disaster areas significantly as they work to recover and rebuild their farms.

Other programs

The delay in the legislation is also holding up funding for a number of other programs. Restoration work in National Parks, railroad and highway repairs, Economic Development Administration programs are among other disaster-related activities that Republicans are blocking.

Despite GOP assurances that funding eventually will be provided, the delay is significantly affecting recovery efforts in many parts of the Nation. South Dakota Governor Bill Janklow, a Republican, has noted that the delay is affecting reconstruction of sewage facilities, highways, and a state-owned rail line. He said, "I'm not going to award contracts on the come. I'm not a fool. What happens if we award a contract and we don't have the money for it? If we don't award contracts in the next 20, 30 days, they're not going to get on them this year."

Brenda Barger, the Mayor of Watertown, South Dakota, recently discussed the situation in her city.

"We truly are just now getting to the point where we can really get the clean up done. Individuals have stripped their homes. On the outside some of them look somewhat business as normal. When you look inside, you realize there is no one in there. Those homes are empty. They either need to be moved or they are going to take some time to be reconstructed so that people can be relocated into them."

“So, it’s incredibly important. Now, it is the position of the city and our responsibility to begin to repair the infrastructure, begin to put us in a situation so that we won’t be influenced by something like this in the same way again. We have many, many needs. I had an entire sewer system shut down for over four weeks, 750 porta-potties are what kept people, 750 families in their homes for that four to five weeks. Now, we need to go back and repair even more of the damage that was done by that. We have a need to begin to work on infrastructure to make sure that the river cannot affect our storm and sanitary sewers again.

“Of course, we have many watershed issues. The northeast part of the state is dealing with being affected by watersheds which have never affected us before. And it really has put us in a very precarious position with a very nominal amount, two to three inches of rain on the watershed. The city of Watertown may be in a 500 year flood event once again.

“In addition to that, the agriculture community is just absolutely in limbo. Many of these people are caught in watershed issues. They’re caught in issues of having lost much of their livestock. And that equates not only to the devastation of their lives but certainly ultimately will impact the city of Watertown, a city of 20,000 people that depend on the agriculture community for 100 miles around for our economic health. So there are many, many issues that these dollars impact us—need to impact us now.

“There is no question those who have insinuated that we have a lot of time, that this is not an immediacy—in fact, they know the opposite to be true. That is why—because it’s so important to us to get these dollars—that’s why these additional amendments have been put on this bill—because they know we are in desperate need of these dollars now.

“I will tell you that the people of South Dakota—northeast South Dakota—I know also of North Dakota and Minnesota—we are not only frustrated, but we are getting angry at the fact that this issue is being held hostage when so many people are in such desperate need of assistance now....

“The people of North and South Dakota and Minnesota are not at home worrying about amendments and about rules and committees. They are trying to pick the pieces of their lives up, trying to find homes, trying to get their jobs in order. No community that undergoes something like this is not totally affected in their business district. Main Street is affected, every aspect, industry. Those things need to be attended to now. And we need those dollars and the commitments. I can not even award contracts until I have firm commitments of dollars.”

The GOP Demands

The disaster relief portions of the bill have been ready for several weeks. In fact, Congress almost passed them as a separate bill before the Memorial Day recess. But key Republican leaders in the House of Representatives blocked that effort to protect their leverage on other issues in the bill.

Despite the urgent need for the legislation, Republicans are holding it hostage over several unrelated issues. Two of these matters are particularly controversial: an automatic Continuing Resolution that seeks to put cuts in government programs on autopilot and a provision to force the Census Bureau to use less accurate and more expensive methods to conduct the upcoming census. Both of these provisions are designed to advance GOP political aims. However, while Republicans scheme and maneuver for bargaining leverage and political advantage, thousands of Americans remain homeless, waiting for the assistance they need to rebuild their lives.

Yesterday, Democrats proposed that the Senate pass the bill without provisions objected to by the President. Republicans objected to that request, forcing disaster victims to keep waiting.

The American people might understand the need to wait if Congress were still deciding what form of assistance was necessary or how to pay for it. But neither of these GOP demands have anything at all to do with disaster relief. They simply would help improve Republicans' future political positioning. And some key Republicans have decided that's much more important than helping Americans who have lost homes, businesses, and livelihoods to recover and begin to rebuild their lives.

The Automatic Continuing Resolution

Republicans are trying to use the disaster relief bill to force the President to accept a GOP proposal for an automatic continuing resolution that funds the government whenever Congress fails to pass appropriations legislation. They argue that the legislation is necessary to prevent another government shutdown.

The automatic continuing resolution is really designed to improve Republican bargaining leverage when negotiating budget bills with the President. It would give Republicans the option of rejecting many of the President's proposals simply by doing nothing. There would be no pressure on Congress to act to avoid a government shutdown. Republicans would be able to make demands on the President as a condition to do their own routine work and live up to commitments they already had made in the recent budget agreement.

In his message vetoing the appropriations legislation, President Clinton gave several examples of cuts that the Republican proposal could force:

- an overall 1998 budget that is \$18 billion below the level in the bipartisan budget agreement;
- a \$1.7 billion cut in college aid, eliminating Pell Grants for 375,000 students;
- 500,000 fewer women, infants and children would receive food and other services each month through the WIC supplemental nutrition program; and
- up to 56,000 fewer children could participate in Head Start.

Similar examples could be provided for nearly every government program. Just last month, Republicans reached agreement with the President on a bipartisan balanced budget plan. The ink is barely dry on that agreement and Republicans are already insisting on a proposal that would allow them to renege on their commitments.

The Republican proposal is not designed to avoid a government shutdown. It is designed to give Republicans the power to put these cuts on automatic pilot, unless the President agrees to their demands.

And the GOP is sure to make demands. This type of legislative blackmail has become standard operating procedure for them. That approach is what led them to shut the government twice in the last Congress; it is what they are doing right now to the disaster relief bill.

The automatic continuing resolution is a transparent ruse, not designed to prevent a government shutdown but rather to give Republicans more bargaining leverage on future legislation. If Republicans want to avoid government shutdowns while final appropriations bills are being developed, all they have to do is resist the temptation to use temporary legislation as a vehicle to blackmail the President into signing other proposals that could never become law on their own merits. Unfortunately, the GOP's actions on the disaster bill show how unwilling they are to exercise such restraint and responsibility.

Census Sampling

While the automatic continuing resolution provision is designed to improve Republicans short-term bargaining leverage, the Census provision is designed to protect Republican political prospects after the next Census.

The Census Bureau and independent experts agree that using population samples as part of the Census count is both more accurate and cheaper than the traditional methods. Without sampling, the Census will miss millions of Americans. But Republicans do not want an accurate Census. Because the Census figures determine the geographical distribution of House seats, Republicans want a Census that is biased in their favor.

Republicans have been quite open about their concern. Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Nicholson has said, "We think 24 to 26 House seats could be affected." That estimate had been widely circulated among Republicans and cited as the reason for their concern about the issue.

Republicans should not hold up disaster relief over such a political issue that can be addressed later and separately. Republicans may not even be right to worry about sampling. While Republicans have implied that sampling could

cost them more than 20 House seats, the reality is quite different. The GOP analyst who provided the figure has noted that it is the number of seats that *might* be affected.

Whether they would actually change hands — and which party would benefit from any changes — is dependent on many other factors, with party control of the legislatures and governorships in affected States being much more significant than the impact of sampling. Control over the redistricting process would be vital because sampling would have a much greater impact within a State than it would between States. The same GOP analyst has estimated that sampling would shift only one House seat among the States. And the State that would gain the seat is Mississippi, one of the more Republican States in the country.

Sampling is an issue that deserves attention. It is both more fair and more accurate, but it does have significant ramifications. The Senate disaster bill included compromise language that would have allowed the Census Bureau to continue preparing for the Census without making an irrevocable decision to use sampling. Unfortunately, House Republicans rejected that compromise and put another road block in the way of disaster relief.

Republicans Fooling No One

Republican insistence on these politically-inspired provisions is holding up disaster relief. But neither the sampling issue nor the automatic continuing resolution have anything to do with disaster relief. Republicans are fooling no one with their claims that the bill is not urgent. The public and press in disaster states have been very critical of the GOP's actions. And a similar reaction can be found throughout the country.

"If the Republicans want these measures, they should be willing to fight for them head-to-head, on a battlefield far removed from the floods and other tragedies that have stalked the land this year. Instead, blind to the past, they have once again taken up the old shutdown strategy, only this time it is not the government that is being shut down, it is financial relief for hard-pressed Americans."

—editorial in the June 5, 1997
Reno Gazette Journal (Nevada).

“A few self-serving members of Congress had realized early on that the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations bill was a must-pass legislation that President Clinton better sign or be blamed for holding up disaster aid. So they tacked on dozens of special-interest provisions that had nothing to do with disaster relief. Politics. ... Homeless flood victims can wait a couple of weeks. They aren’t a priority. The holiday is. Political leverage is.”

—Charles Levendosky, editorial page editor of the *Casper Star-Tribune* (Wyoming) in a May 28 article.

“The President is right and the Republicans are wrong about the disaster relief bill that he has said he will veto unless they drop amendments having nothing to do with its basic purpose. Once again in trying to use an appropriations bill as a forcing device they have overreached.”

—editorial in the June 8, 1997
Washington Post.

Republicans Ignore Warnings

Unfortunately, Republicans chose to send the President a bill with these provisions and it has been vetoed. It is unclear if Republicans will continue to insist on their demands and hold disaster relief hostage. Republicans have resisted compromise so far, even dropping a Senate-passed compromise on the Census sampling issue. However, every day of delay creates further problems in areas hit by natural disasters. Republicans must act immediately to pass a bill that the President can sign.

Senate Democrats are determined to enact disaster relief as soon as possible. Several Democrats have threatened to block any other matter until Republicans produce a bill that the President can sign into law. Republicans have kept communities hit by disaster waiting for too long. Ending that wait is a top priority for Senate Democrats.